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ABSTRACT

Theater artists/practitioners have for many years relied on their natural creative abilities in designing makeup, lights, sound, costumes, and sets. Theater researchers believed the scenographer must create a series of dramatic physical settings that blended into a complete revaluation of the playwright's story. However, the nature of the creative process, it has been suggested, can be delineated and organized in such a manner as to allow for a more systematic approach to the designer's creative work. A three-phase process was developed for the set designer's use in creating an appropriate environment for the playwright's story. In the inception phase, the scenographer reads the script for ideas and themes. In the action phase, the scenographer translates the inceptive concepts into working designs, budgets, and schedules. The actualization phase involved the actual implementation of developing the set, adherence to the established budgets, and an accurate following of the production schedules. The three-phase creative scenographic process was tested through application in a main stage production of the play "Greater Tuna." Results indicated that the process was an effective procedure for producing main stage theatre productions. (Author/RS)

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THREE-PHASE CREATIVE PROCESS OF SCENOGRAPHIC DESIGN FOR MAIN STAGE THEATRE PRODUCTIONS

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Abstract

Theatre artists have for many years relied on their natural creative abilities in designing makeup, lights, sound, costumes, and sets. It has been suggested the nature of the creative process, however, can be delineated and organized in such a manner as to allow for a more systematic approach to the designer's creative work.

The researchers have identified and applied a three-phase process of analysis for set designers' use in creating an appropriate environment for the playwright's story. Phase One was Inception. It was determined the scenographer should read the script for ideas and themes. Next, Phase Two was Action. The scenographer translated the inceptive concepts into working designs, budgets, and schedules. Finally, Phase Three was Actualization. This involved the actual implementation of developing the set, adherence to the established budgets, and an accurate following of the production schedules. The Three-Phase Creative Scenographic Process was tested through application in a main stage production of the play, Greater Tuna.

After completion of this study, the researchers concluded the Three-Phase Creative Scenographic Process was an effective procedure for producing main stage theatre productions.

THREE-PHASE CREATIVE PROCESS OF SCENOGRAPHIC DESIGN FOR MAIN STAGE THEATRE PRODUCTIONS

Live theatre has long been an artistic function performed as a distillation of emotional statements and written thoughts which convey an image of life through the use of metaphorical language and movement. It has been the goal of theatre to make the playwright's ideas "live" through the work of directors, actors, and teams of technicians whose responsibility it is to interpret the script. It has always been necessary for these artists to synthesize the playwright's work so that it may be presented to an audience as a clear, concise representation of the intended story.

Theatre practitioners have sought to make the audience feel at ease. This has been accomplished through creative use of the scripts, sound, lights, actors' physical actions, and stage sets. To allow the audience to be receptive, it has been necessary to assist the audience in suspending their disbelief of what they are experiencing in the theatre. Clearly, the audience has needed to sustain their disbelief long enough to be influenced by the playwright's story. In essence, the practitioners have given the audience a reason to remain seated for the duration of the performance.

Archer (1983) noted that since the neoclassic period the literary world has recognized three reasons individuals attend the theatre. He cited Joseph Wolfgang Von Goethe, a German poet, theorist, and playwright of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as having identified three functions of art: (a) entertainment, (b) exaltation, and (c) edification. Dietrich (1956) suggested the end result of a production should satisfy at least one of the three functions. When theatre patrons leave their homes to venture out and sit for several hours in a darkened room with others in the community, they ought to find entertainment. Goethe (as cited in Archer, 1983) has suggested audiences ought to experience a break in the monotony of their everyday lives. As they sit in the darkened room it should be possible for them to vicariously relate to the characters on the stage. Members of the audience should be given an environment through which they experience and feel emotions they would not ordinarily have a chance to deal with in the course of their own lifetimes. Ultimately, this experience in a darkened room should satisfy the audience's need for a sense of "shared community"; to feel they belong to and are an integral part of an intelligent and enlightened society.

The purpose of this project was to identify a scenographic design process which would allow for the creation of a physical environment that gave patrons of live theatre productions an opportunity to experience entertainment, exaltation, and edification. The researchers believed the scenographer must create a series of dramatic physical settings that blended into a complete revelation of the playwright's story. To create such physical settings, it seemed necessary for the

scenographer to possess a clear, uncluttered understanding of the script. It was recognized the scenographer's task involved many long hours of script analysis, research, collaboration, drafting of designs, construction, and lighting work.

For purpose of this paper it was necessary to define several key terms:

Inception. Phase-One of the creative design process in which the playwright's ideas and themes are identified through careful reading and analysis of the script.

Action. Phase-Two of the creative design process in which the playwright's ideas and themes are structured into drawings, budgets, and production schedules.

Actualization. Phase-Three of the creative design process in which the drawings, budgets, and schedules are implemented by the placing of the set on stage, adding light, sound, and technical rehearsals in preparation for the actual showing before an audience.

Three-Phase Creative Scenographic Process. A systematic program of inception, action, and actualization which is applied to scripts in order to design and produce live theatre productions consistent with the intentions of the playwright.

Scenographer. A proficient theatrical artist who has been assigned the responsibility to design and technically direct a live theatre production.

Methodology

To achieve the purpose of this creative project, the researchers selected Greater Tuna as a representative script for production in implementing the Three-Phase Creative Scenographic Process.

Procedure

This project followed the activities detailed below in order to test the effectiveness of the Creative Scenographic Process.

Inception. The first step was a read through of the script during which the scenographer sought to discover the playwright's intended message in the play, its ideas and themes. A second reading allowed the scenographer to note in more detail the flow of action, time, locale, and mood of the script. During the third reading the scenographer concentrated on the characters' movements and necessary scenery changes demanded by the script.

The scenographer worked in collaboration with the director. During early meetings with the director, the scenographer discussed the playwright's intended message. The scenographer provided rough sketches of initial design impressions. The director and scenographer considered the practical and artistic courses to be taken in the production. Agreement was reached concerning the place, locale, period, and time. It should be understood that when an author makes no mention of these specifics, it is left to the director and scenographer to establish them.

The playwright's ideas and themes were thoroughly discussed. A combination of thematic set, lighting, costumes, music, makeup, and dramatic action were considered during discussions of the play's mood. Character attitudes and social status, along with their relationships to one another and financial standing, were carefully examined during the Inception Phase.

The director and scenographer discussed all major movements of scenes and characters. The scenographer considered the timely and progressive set changes as well as character entrances and exists. This type of discussion allowed the scenographer to plan the traffic flow throughout the run of the dramatic action. The scenographer drew an initial set of floor plans which contained the placement of doors, stairs, platforms, large set pieces, and furniture. In completing these drawings, the scenographer was careful to take into consideration the physical size of the theatre facility, lighting limitations, and fly space. Additionally, a full inventory of flats, platforms, tools, and materials in stock was completed by the scenographer.

Action. A budget for the production along with a schedule of personnel was completed. Next a calendar was drawn up for building, painting, lighting, and technical rehearsals as well as the run of the show.

Detailed research produced the line, color, and texture of the time and period determined for the play. The scenographer produced finished sketches in the form of frontal elevations and two-dimensional color perspective drawings for the director.

A set of detailed working drawings of all flats, platforms, drops, furniture, properties, and lighting to be built or hung, were set to a one-quarter inch scale. From the working drawings it was possible for the scenographer to formulate and budget for lumber, soft goods, and hard goods to be used in the production.

Actualization. Priority in scheduled building and painting produced a functional set shell for the director and actors to work with during the rehearsal period. Aesthetic, or less functional, detail was added as scheduled. Set, lighting, and the remaining technical requirements were completed consistent with the prescribed schedule and budget in a timely manner allowing the actors adequate time to rehearse on a completed set. Running crews for props, lighting, and fly rail were selected and worked with the facilities at least one week before the opening of the play. A final dress rehearsal was held the night before the opening of the play to the public.

Results/Discussion

This study involved implementation of a Three-Phase Creative Scenographic Process designed to give a step-by-step guide for approaching scripts and delivering designs for main stage theatre productions.

Scenographic Inception. The artistic ideas of the scenographer are those aimed toward the service of the script and the artistic medium involving space, light, and movement. "The aesthetic values of the stage setting are relative, and no more important than the production of which they are a part" (Simonson, 1963, p. 3). The role of the scenographer is to serve as a "member of a group of interpreters" (p. 11). The scenographer serves to bring balance to the entire theatre production. Metaphorically speaking these artists are the tail on a theatrical kite.

In producing Greater Tuna the scenographer found that reading the script in an effort to identify the playwright's intent, and that in collaborating with the director, formed a sound basis for designing the set. Knowing the details of the playwright's intentions concerning time, locale, theme, character traits, and dramatic action, as well as knowing how the director viewed each of these dimensions of the production, gave the scenographer a focal point for the designs. The rough sketches were the result of careful attention to the creative process during the Inception Phase.

Scenographic Action. Svaboda (cited in Burian, 1971) emphasized the need for an active and exacting knowledge of the technical needs to make the creative possible. The successful scenographer must be the master of a complicated medium. The designer must be "conversant" (p. 3) with all the realities of the theatrical production.

According to Burian (1971), these realities include "the pressure of deadlines, budget, personnel supervision, and inter-artistic cooperation" (p. XX). The designer must find agreement with the director's needs and the demands of the playwright's script. The next step is to take this composite image and make a preliminary set of sketches that best serve the production needs. Svaboda (cited in Burian, 1971) noted that this is the time in the design process when the scenographer makes the aesthetic choices of "dramatic time, dramatic space, and dramatic light" (p. 30) that are uniquely the designer's own.

For this production of Greater Tuna the set designs and working drawings added clarity to the creative process. The scenographer was better able to give precise and accurate instructions to the set crew. As a result of implementing phase two, scheduling and budgeting saved the scenographer lost work time and made the building process flow in a more timely manner toward the completion of the set. It was apparent the initial time spent in and forethought given to detailed study of the script resulted in a more systematic and effective completion of the scenographer's responsibilities. Using phase two helped avoid costly time and monetary surprises.

Scenographic Actualization. Since the scenographer's work is subordinate to the overall value of the script, it is not enough to be able to draw pretty pictures. If these artistic endeavors do not bring to life the full intent of the playwright, director, and actors it has achieved its ultimate goal. The purpose of the scenic elements is to

lower the audience's resistance, thereby nurturing their suspension of disbelief and allowing them to experience at least one of Goethe's functions of theatre.

As suggested by Svaboda (cited in Burian, 1971), the final product must move through three dimensional, transformable space to climax in a blend of set and script. This blend of space and script is an overlapping growth process that helps bring the actors to full dramatic characters. Also, this blending process allows the audience to evolve from a group of single personalities to an homogeneous group entity of involved theatrical spectators.

Having the set ready for the rehearsals of Greater Tuna allowed the actors and running crew time to become familiar with the it. The acting and technical ensemble were able to perform their duties in a comfortable and professional manner as a result of having implemented phase three. The set was compatible to the action of the script and met the director's needs. The acting space helped create an environment conducive to the dramatic action. The interaction of script, set, lighting, costumes, makeup, and actors was realized because the scenographer adhered to the creative process.

Conclusions

The researchers found that the Three-Phase Creative Scenographic Process can be a tool in producing a collaborative theatrical production. By using this process, the likelihood the audience will sustain their suspension of disbelief is increased. The process allows the scenographer to organize and simplify the creation and building of the set. Using this step-by-step procedure gives the scenographer a beginning, middle, and end
in the design process.

Phase One forces the scenographer to consider details in the script which might escape notice under the pressure of deadlines and meetings. Without phase one the final product might be without clarity of detail. When this lack of clarity occurs it could mean the actors and audience would be confused and, ultimately, there would be a decreased understanding of the playwright's intended message.

Phase Two's value to the creative process is that it offers the potential for more options for the scenographer. This phase translates the work of the Inception phase into diagrams, schedules, and budget plans. These allow for the scenographer to be precise and accurate in the preparation for moving into the last phase, Actualization.

The positive effect of phase three is that it allows for the best timing and delivery of the playwright's message in collaboration with the created physical environment provided by the scenographer. The blend of script, set, and character action provides an effective three-dimensional expression of the playwright's story.

Limitations of This Study

There were two major limitations involved in this project. First, the Three-Phase Creative Scenographic Process has only been applied to the production of Greater Tuna. It is reasonable to conclude the

process should be tested in productions using other plays.

Secondly, the researchers concluded the process presents some of its own special problems. In Phase One (Inception) it is necessary to recognize that an immense amount of time is needed to do a thorough preliminary job of analysis. Phase Two (Action) involves considerable effort to produce the drawings, budgets, and schedules. When transferred from paper into practice, it may be necessary to complete major adjustments in the building of the set. Finally, in Phase Three (Actualization) a difference between the realities of the physical set in use, and correcting unforeseen flaws or weaknesses, could limit the effectiveness of this phase. Time constraints may not allow scenographers the opportunity to alter design concepts once into the final rehearsal periods.

Implications for Further Study

The Three-Phase Creative Scenograpic Process should be applied to the production of musical comedies, operas, dramas, and period plays. Use of the process enables the scenographer to discover the depth of scripted ideas and themes in a variety of theatrical texts, thereby rendering systematic and effective completion of an artistic product.

Some theatre artists would claim that the Three-Phase Creative Scenographic Process, as presented in this paper, stifles the natural creative process. It should be noted, however, the Creative Scenographic Process allows designers to form clear reactions to the playwright's message. Without such clarification, the scenographer might otherwise create an unfocused interpretation of the script. The overlapping nature of the Creative Scenographic Process should allow for a successful, collaborative theatrical production.

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